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## **Grounded theory and its application in studies on disabled students' reality**

### **Abstract**

The article is focused on the potentialities and difficulties which might appear in applying the methodology of grounded theory in the research into disabled university students. The major assumptions of grounded theory are described and the focus is on some selected aspects of designing and conducting studies in compliance with grounded theory. These are: the specification of the research area and aim, the choice of strategies, pre-assumption, the beginning dilemma, fear of finishing field saturation, building and grounding the theory. The attempt is also made to refer the difficulties resulting from these elements of grounded theory to the studies conducted among disabled students as well as to some solutions suggested in expert literature.

Keywords: grounded theory, disabled university student, difficulties.

## **Teoria ugruntowana i jej zastosowanie w badaniu rzeczywistości studentów niepełnosprawnych**

### **Abstrakt**

W artykule zwrócono uwagę na możliwości i trudności, jakie mogą wystąpić w stosowaniu metodologii strategii teorii ugruntowanej w badaniu studentów niepełnosprawnych. Opisano główne za-

łożenia teorii ugruntowanej oraz skupiono się na wybranych aspektach projektowania i prowadzenia badań zgodnie z teorią ugruntowaną – określeniu obszaru i celu badań, wyborze strategii, przedzałożeniowości, dylemacie początku, strachu przed zakończeniem nasycania pola, budowaniu i ugruntowywaniu teorii. Trudności, jakie pojawiają się w związku z tymi elementami teorii ugruntowanej, starano się odnieść do badań studentów niepełnosprawnych oraz rozwiązań proponowanych w literaturze przedmiotu.

Słowa kluczowe: teoria ugruntowana, student niepełnosprawny, trudności.

## Introduction

Special education teachers, who deal with disability related phenomena, rarely use the methodology of grounded theory in their studies. Occasional works on disability<sup>1</sup> which present research results obtained with the use of this method may confirm its scarce popularity. The article is aimed at showing not only the potentialities but also certain difficulties in the applications of grounded theory in exploring the reality of the disabled, especially those who undertake upper education. Due to their subject matter, disability studies require thorough consideration and taking into account many factors. As in any other research, the aim of the planned study should be thought over at first. Specifying the goal allows for grounding the study in a particular research strategy. This requires the knowledge of what is important – showing the general tendencies in the investigated issue or rather the in-depth investigation of a particular research field. In compliance with the assumptions of its creators, the methodology of grounded theory consists in the building of a middle range theory based on systematically collected empirical data (Glaser, Strauss, 2009, p. 26). This theory enables in-depth exploration of new fields owing to the applied principle of reducing the pre-assumptions. However, it is important to examine the phenomena and events in their context, which gains even more significance in the case of disabled students. Some basic formal qualities of grounded theory can be distinguished (Glaser, Strauss, 1967, quoted in: Konecki, 2000; Malewski, 1998):

<sup>1</sup> Some studies with the use of this methodology were conducted, among others, by Cytowska, 2015; Niedbalski J. (2016), *Jakości życia niepełnosprawnych sportowców wyczynowych w aspekcie społeczno-kulturowym – ujęcie socjologiczne*, „Quality in Sport”, nr 1; Niedbalski J. (2015) *Obraz sportu i niepełnosprawnego sportowca w autodeskrypcji zamieszczanej na stronach i blogach internetowych*, „Niepełnosprawność – zagadnienia, problemy, rozwiązania”, nr III; Mazurek E. (2013), *Choroba w rodzinie. Zastosowanie metodologii teorii ugruntowanej do analizy funkcjonowania rodziny w sytuacji choroby*, „Family Forum”, Redakcja Wydawnictw Wydziału Teologicznego Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, s. 25–39.

- minimal pre-conceptualization of research (which enables exploration of new phenomena);
- possibility of the modification of constructed theories;
- possibility of referring to other research fields;
- analytical thinking – “situational” reasoning in regard to the motives of human activities strictly;
- associated with the context of these activities;
- fitting into the reality – a strong relation between the category and the examined phenomenon;
- potential of the theory to “work” – the capacity to explain the examined phenomena;
- relevance;
- logical compactness;
- precisely defined content scope.

An analysis of expert literature allows for distinguishing three major varieties of the methodology of grounded theory: 1) Anselm L. Strauss and Juliet M. Corbin's version, 2) Barney G. Glaser's version – the so called Classical Grounded Theory, and 3) Kathy Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory (see: Charmaz 2009; Gorzko, pp. 27–44; Marciniak 2012). Moreover, Norman K. Denzin (2007) distinguishes the following: positivist, constructivist, objectivist, post-modernist, situational, and computer assisted grounded theory. This can be supplemented with the visual grounded theory, developed by Krzysztof T. Konecki (Gorzko 2013, pp. 6–7). The main elements of grounded theory comprise: theoretical sampling, coding, theoretical saturation and constant comparison (Bryman, Bell 2007, pp. 582–583). These particular constituents, the steps undertaken in the research conducted in compliance with grounded theory, create both potentialities and difficulties in exploring the academic reality of disabled students.

In this study, the thesis is put forward that the use of grounded theory requires knowledge, scientific discipline, and a lot of reflectiveness from a researcher, especially a young one. Although there is no earlier designed and operationalized research plan here (in advance sampled group, hypotheses, variables, indicators), this does not mean that the theory has no rules – just the opposite, a lot of emphasis is put on research procedures (Babbie, 2009, p. 332).

In the next section, the difficulties will be discussed which young researchers can encounter in the studies conducted in the methodology of grounded theory.

## Difficulties with applying grounded theory in exploring disabled students' reality

As in the case of every group of disabled people, the scientific examination of disabled university students requires due deliberation and take into account the specificities of disability. To get a deeper insight into their situation or to recognize what seems invisible at the first sight, grounded theory can be applied. It determines the necessary conditions which have to be fulfilled to carry out the research in a right way, but the methods and techniques of collecting the data, the sample, or the hypotheses emerge in the course of the studies. This results from the consecutive analyses of the research material collected in an ongoing way and does not consist in fulfilling another set of points in an earlier established plan. Such a procedure allows for following what we discover in the research process. When the disabled are examined, they often undertake the motifs which are usually left unattended, because they see the reality in a different way than people without disability. The reality of the examined group is being revealed gradually. Grounded theory provides a large margin for the information which cannot be always predicted in quantitative studies. Still, there are some tangent points with positivist studies. Earl Babbie claims that grounded theory can be presented as combining the naturalistic approach with the positivistic care for a "systematic set of procedures" in conducting qualitative studies (Babbie, 2009, p. 332). These procedures are an important constituent of the research process, but – quite frequently – they also confront young researchers with certain difficulties associated with their implementation.

The first stage is the *specification of the research field and aim and the sampling procedure*. As every activity has its beginning, every research should start with knowing what is going to be observed and/or examined. The most preliminary choice concerns the selection of the object and/or phenomenon for observation and does not concern the applying of particular notions and assumptions in regard to the observed phenomena nor the hypotheses related to their occurrence. What is of crucial significance here is the category describing the phenomenon of the so called 'context of discovery' (Konecki, 2000, p. 27; see also: Fine, Deegan, 1996; Merton, Barber, 2004). When the research field (e.g. education of the disabled) is specified, the goal is indicated – what is not only interesting for the researcher but also unexplored (recognizing and understanding the reality of the disabled who undertake upper education). More and more frequent reports and other quantitative studies show that the number of disabled university students is increasing (*Dostępność edukacji...*, 2015). This results from the growing support which enhances the development of new cognitively interesting phenomena (e.g. infrahumanization, subtle discrimination of the disabled). The best way of exploring this subject matter is the application of a qualitative method. Consistently referring to the suggested project, the initial sample is a group of disabled students, later enlarged with all the people who can provide indispensable information which saturates the field of the categories emerging in the initial analyses.

What becomes important after indicating the field and aim of the research is the **choice of strategy**. The varieties of grounded theory, mentioned in the introduction, create various potentialities but also some dilemmas concerning their choice. The answers should be found to the following questions: Which is the best for this particular study: Strauss and Corbin's version, Glaser's 'classical grounded theory', or Charmaz's constructivist one? Should the focus be on Konecki's visual grounded theory? Is any of them better in the context of the investigated field of special education? Is any of them more relevant in the context of a particular problem within special education, in this case – disabled students? It is the researcher who has to decide by answering the questions on the subject matter s/he feels good at and the strategy which seems most appropriate for the established goal? Does the researcher want to describe objectively and discover what the data conceal or rather wants to construct the reality in the way determined by his/her individual view? Does the researcher assume, following Glaser and Strauss, the focus on the examination of processes and activities as well as the interpretative understanding of the data? Does the researcher, in compliance with Charmaz's idea, assume that neither the data nor the theories are discovered and that every theoretical interpretation does not lead to an accurate reflection of the world but to the birth of its interpretative image? (cf. B. Cytowska, 2012, p. 148). The answers to these enquiries allows for making an individual decision at which direction to aim.

The third very important issue which young researchers have to handle is the **lack of pre-assumption** (to a certain possible extent). In the works on the methodology of grounded theory<sup>2</sup>, this is one of the main guidelines for the research process (Bukalska, p. 83). In the studies on disabled students, some questions are raised: Can a special education teacher undertake the research into disabled students? Can someone who is both a theorist and a practitioner be objective and free of preliminary assumptions? Will the specialist knowledge and experience allow to climb onto the meta-level in the analysis of the observed phenomena? Does the assumption that it is as the researcher thinks not limit too much or block new broader views and objective perception of the collected research material? Can a specialist view the data in an objective way, not tending to find the confirmation of the acquired knowledge? (cf. Belza, 2016). The demand for non-assumption is not easy to fulfill. Apart from certain cultural codes and the beliefs instilled in them in the socialization process, researchers have their own standpoints – for instance in the form of the paradigms and theories preferred in their work. They also have a certain knowledge of the investigated section of the reality, acquired e.g. through mass media and consisting of both facts and their interpretation (Bukalska 2015, p. 101). However, as Konecki (2005) writes, it is difficult to start the studies without any pre-conceptualization. As mentioned earlier, the first thing is to know what to observe and examine – the object of observation is

<sup>2</sup> Both the foreign (Strauss and Glasser, Corbin, Charmaz) and Polish studies (Konecki, Gorzko, Manterys).



important, not particular notions, categories, assumptions, and hypotheses. Yet, this requires research curiosity. What can be found owing to grounded theory (both in the object-related and theoretical sense) is what was not searched for at the beginning of the study (*serendipity*)<sup>3</sup>. The expert literature often promotes the assumption that the social reality is understood most appropriately by the actors engaged in it (Guziuk-Tkacz, Siegień-Matyjewicz, 2012, p. 281). As a participant of a certain reality, one can not only see the unexplored (which in fact is the starting point of all studies) but also know to which theories and contexts the examined subject matter should be referred in order not to discover what was already found out a long time ago. As Zenon Gajdzica states, being a committed researcher must be associated with emotional engagement in the perception of the examined reality (Gajdzica, 2013, p. 11). Therefore, what matters is not the total elimination of pre-conceptualization but the focus in the preliminary research on the detailed description of the qualities of the collected empirical material (e.g. notes from participant observation, organization stories, biographical narrations, free interview transcripts, published research reports) before any theoretical statement is formulated (Konecki 2000, p. 27). This is not easy and requires from a young researcher a lot of humility and reflectiveness as regards the data. However – following this assumption will enable the right consolidation of the emerging theory.

**The beginning dilemma** is another issue which may bother a young researcher: with what to start, whether with particular categories which emerged from the first collected data or rather with the description of the conducted research, or maybe with the context of the conducted studies; whether to describe in the course or after finishing the whole research; whether it is possible to convert the reasoning and – instead of starting with the theory – to build and ground it in the data (cf. Belza, 2016). What seems essential is drifting away from the structure of empirical works which is typical of the quantitative research strategy. In this strategy, there is a clearly indicated way of conduct (which at the same time constitutes the structure of the work) right from the beginning and strict following it will bring the researcher to the aim. This is what researchers should free from, they need to become more flexible, subtle, and reflective in each section of the data and each research stage. The task now is to collect data (theoretical sampling), to code and describe it in order to specify which data to collect and where to do this, to return to what has already

<sup>3</sup> 'Serendipity' means making discovery by chance or the ability to make fortunate and unexpected discoveries by chance. The term was coined by an English writer Horace Walpole (1754). The construction of this neologism was based on a story described in an old Persian fairy tale 'The Three Princes of Serendip', where the princes made permanent discoveries of things they were not searching for. Serendip is the old name of the island of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), the name is derived from a Sanskrit word 'Sinhādvīpa', which means the Isle of Lions. The entry 'Serendipity' in: Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable (2000), Sixteenth Edition, revised by Adrian Room, Harper-Information, see also: Merton, Barber, 2004: 1-2, quoted in: Konecki, 2005.

been and to create the whole. During the theoretical sampling, the emerging theory becomes a guideline helping to decide which comparative groups and interactive contexts to sample and how many are needed (Konecki, 2000, pp. 30–31).

The first stage of the analytical work which helps to organize the large research material is coding. 'Coding means providing particular data segments with a label describing its contents. Coding elicits the essence of the data, enables its grouping and makes it easier to compare its particular fragments' (Charmaz, 2009, p. 9). With no doubt Kathy Charmaz's advice is valuable (2012, p. 5)<sup>4</sup> – she writes that coding itself provokes certain analytic questions right at the start. Among other questions, she mentions:

- What does the data prove (what does it concern)? (Glaser, 1978, p. 57; Glaser and Strauss, 1967);
- What does the data suggest, state, assume? (Charmaz, 2006, p. 47);
- Whose point of view does it present? (Charmaz, 2006, p. 47);
- What theoretical categories does the data indicate? (Glaser, 1978);
- When, how and with what consequences do interaction participants act? (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

What seems most important is the unceasing describing, which allows for generating theories and indicating consecutive stages of the research procedure.

This ongoing sampling raises fear concerning the moment when this process should be finished. What appears is the *fear of completing field saturation*. Some new questions are raised: How to recognize that the field has been saturated? How many samples/cases should be analyzed? When should the saturation be stopped? These are frequent doubts of a young researcher, the questions which bring about uncertainty and fear of failure or the accusation that the collected samples are not sufficient to ground the theory or that there is still something else that might change the final shape of this theory. It is of greatest significance to be aware that saturation is the lack of additional data which introduce something new. Every next sample indicates certain repeatability – seeing the consecutive similar cases, the researcher becomes sure that the field has been saturated (Glaser, Strauss, 2009, p. 53). Theoretical saturation takes place through formulating the features of the category, which can be completed only when diverse comparative groups are taken. These groups will enable the detection of various conditions of the functioning of categories (Konecki, 2000, p. 31). It is the researcher and his/her sensitivity on which the decision depends whether the next samples introduce anything new or rather do not follow any new direction and only confirm what has already been worked out.

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<sup>4</sup> This list comes from Kathy Charmaz's article: Charmaz, 2012.



In qualitative studies, the issue of *ethics* is of great importance – the question how deep a researcher can go into ‘the world of the disabled student’ and whether a too critical description will not deepen the distance towards the disabled, with which the researcher as a special education teacher struggles. This problem does not concern only the methodology of grounded theory but all studies in general. The dilemma concerning not distaining the own nest is a frequent problem, which might impose some limitations on the researcher in broader descriptions of the examined reality. On the other hand, scientific research in disability studies should enhance the improvement of the disabled’s reality. Therefore, they should describe this reality as objectively as possible.

Keeping the balance between the gentleness and sensitivity towards another person and the researcher’s honesty and the wish to provide a reliable description of the reality is the answer to the inquiry about ethics. It is essential to follow the main ethical principles which constitute the foundation of qualitative studies. The major rule is ‘*not to harm*’ oneself, the participants of the study, and the beneficiaries of the research results. The four main norms are the following: conscious and voluntary consent of the research participants, honesty in implementation of the study, ensuring of confidentiality and privacy, verification of the research results (Christians, 2009, pp. 217-218).

The *building and grounding the theory* is a critical moment for a young researcher who undertakes work with the use of the strategy of grounded theory (cf. Belza, 2016). What is worth doing here is answering the general question what a scientific theory is, as it is difficult to build it without knowing its essence. According to the lexicon of methodological terms, a theory (ancient Greek: *theoria* – observing, examining) is a plan, idea, assumption, concept based on the cognition and understanding of important factors which shape a certain sphere of the reality. A theory can be also understood as an intellectual construction which creates out of many elements a certain whole that enables the understanding of the relations between the analyzed phenomena/processes. It is also a system of logically and content-wise organized theorems which are interrelated and fulfill the accepted criteria of scientific rules and methodological correctness. The last approach shows that a theory is understood as a logical, intellectual verbal expression of the examined reality which helps to explain the existence and functioning (Guziuk-Tkacz, Siegień-Matyjewicz, 2012, p. 280). A theory should not constitute a summary of the observation but should be a creative product of the researcher’s thought which goes beyond the collected data (Guziuk-Tkacz, Siegień-Matyjewicz, 2012, p. 280). Theories should allow for predicting, explaining and understanding the social behaviour which they concern. They ought to be understandable to both specialists and other recipients. However, what constitutes the best test of grounded theory is the participants’ recognizing themselves in the research report (Strauss et al., 1985, p. X, quoted in: Konecki 2000, p. 28). To meet these criteria, a theory (hypotheses, notional description

and theoretical suggestions) has to 'fit', 'work', 'be relevant' (be important for activity of the people in the examined field), be modifiable, and should be transcending – be such that can be referred to other (e.g. formal) research fields and the research methods applied there. These notions belong to the 'rhetoric of generating a theory' (Konecki, 2000, p. 28).

To sum up, while conducting effective studies with the application of grounded theory in such a way that the researcher is both scientific and creative, it is recommended to follow some guidelines, stressed by Strauss and Corbin: *'From time to time, go one step back and ask: What is it all about? Does what I think that I see fit the reality recorded in the data? Data itself does not lie [...] Keep a sceptical attitude. All theoretical explanations, categories, hypotheses, questions concerning the data, no matter whether they come directly or indirectly from comparisons, literature or experience, always require testing on the basis of real data and should never be accepted as a fact [...]. Apply research procedures. The procedures of collecting and analyzing data are designed in such a way that the study acquires the value of accurateness. At the same time, the procedures allow to eliminate burdens and lead to verification of at least some of your assumptions which might influence unrealistic data'* (Strauss, Corbin, 1994, quoted in: Denzin, Lincoln, pp. 273-285).

Following the recommended procedures will enable not only the building of a middle range theory which will be theoretically grounded but also will help to explain the investigated phenomena – e.g. the reality of disabled students in the university space. This will also make it possible to use this knowledge to understand the situation of disabled students as well as plan the activities which will improve the construction of the commonly shared reality.

## The conclusion

Qualitative methods, especially the methodology of grounded theory, are really valuable in studies concerning disabled students. The discussed methodology enables viewing and exploring new phenomena, putting forward theses and solid grounding of the emerging theories. The article was aimed at showing some difficulties associated with such way of conducting studies which young researchers might face. It was to show that this methodology requires reliable knowledge, familiarization with the procedures and, first of all, a lot of reflectiveness. Grounded theory allows for obtaining an in-depth and realistic image of disabled students' reality – an image which presents what this reality is like. However, this methodology does not examine the cause-effect dependencies, which are typical of quantitative studies. What sometimes occurs, according to a few researchers, are the tangent points for both approaches – these authors indicate that combining them in one research project is a good idea (cf. Miles, Huberman 2000; Konecki 2005). By using methodological triangulation (in spite

of strong criticism it gets from many researchers), it can be seen how frequent the phenomena discovered in the grounded methodology are. The phenomena revealed by disabled students and concerning their functioning in academic roles might be used in quantitative studies to test whether they are noticed or rather not noticed at all, or maybe noticed but marginalized and not taken into account as unimportant or troublesome.

All these moments make young researchers' struggle with grounded theory look like a battlefield, where they have to handle various fights during the research process. This also confirms the thesis put forward at the beginning of the article that the application of this method first of all requires knowledge (both the knowledge of the applications of grounded theory and the broad knowledge concerning different fields of life, which is necessary in the process of comparing samples and in metaphoric transfer – through analogy – to the selected area of the own research). Secondly, this methodology requires scientific discipline (obeying the procedures and meticulousness), and thirdly – a lot of reflectiveness (cf. Belza, 2016), which is the foundation of appropriate grounding of the theory dealing with the academic reality of disabled students. This is aptly reflected in the following words: 'The basic requisite of qualitative analysis seems to be a bit of creativity, persistent and systematic search (for truth), appropriate sensitivity to theoretical issues and cognitive flexibility – the skill of quick change of the way of interpretation or transformation of the data' (Miles, Huberman, 2000, p. 323).

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